

## Book Review: Behind the Mask: Black Hybrid Identities

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can do the job for us. We need to understand the relationship between classificatory schemes and between concepts, positions and experiences. These days, most agree that we need to be sensitive to issues of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. in doing empirical work. But that is easier said than done. There is no way that one scholar can have knowledge of the making of class in the detail that Skeggs has at the same time as paying full attention to gender, race, sexuality, geography, etc. This book provides an example of what we stand to lose if we demand a democratic representation of everything everywhere. But still, *Class, Self, Culture* is about the intersections between class, gender and race, because it shows how understandings and representations of class are gendered and racialized.

As Skeggs points out, there are some scholars who would place class in the realm of the economic, while placing other classifications, such as gender and sexuality, in the cultural. Skeggs's book is a comment on such a division, making visible how class needs to be understood in cultural terms. The book is therefore also on the relationship between the cultural and the economic, or rather on how the cultural is not an area of life operating in a different logic than the economic, that it is also about appropriation, exploitation and resistance. An example in the book is how while the working class is generally constructed as wrong in opposition to the middle class, who are right, there are still parts of working-class culture that can be claimed and used as resources by the middle class. This is called selective appropriation.

I am hardly doing justice to the complexity of the book or the concept of class here, but I hope that I have been able to convey that I find *Class, Self, Culture* to be a good and important book. The question of what class is in its totality is important, and there are too many scholars dealing with small pieces of the puzzle compared to the few people trying to solve it.

## REFERENCE

Skeggs, Beverley (1997) *The Formations of Class and Gender*. London: Sage.

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## BEHIND THE MASK: BLACK HYBRID IDENTITIES

Shirley Anne Tate  
*Black Skins, Black Masks: Hybridity, Dialogism, Performativity*  
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, 181 pp., ISBN 0-7546-3641-0

In *Black Skins, Black Masks*, Shirley Anne Tate explores and challenges discourses of Black authenticity that equate Blackness with dark skin and a Caribbean and/or African heritage. She is concerned with an 'everyday' hybridity that challenges these powerful discourses, arguing that an in-depth study of hybridity provides us with new insights into 'race', racism, politics and culture. She critiques much of the theorization of hybridity dating from the early 1990s, arguing that it has excluded Black women's voices and Black women's experiences. Tate's aim is to move beyond hybridity to examine how Blackness is transformed and reformed in women's talk and through their social actions.

The 36 women who participate in Tate's study are all of Caribbean heritage and living in three geographical areas of Britain: London, the Midlands and Yorkshire. While a few of the women agree to talk to Tate on a one-to-one basis, it appears that a number are persuaded to participate through an invitation to dinner at her home, where she tapes after-dinner conversations, encouraging her guests to talk about their childhoods in Britain and tell each other the general stories of their lives. We learn that many already know each other as family members or colleagues, and that this was intended to make the sharing of experiences more comfortable.

While Tate records that many of the women found the exercise cathartic and some suggested they would like to come back and do some more, it appears that once the participants had given their stories they were not invited to comment on the transcripts or on the ways in which their accounts were reworked and transformed in the theory generating process. Tate briefly acknowledges how for some participants, those who were her friends, she traded on affective ties in order to get these stories. She also acknowledges that for other participants, who were in fact strangers to her, the research process opened up a brief period of intimacy between strangers who have no real emotional attachment. The study raises important ethical and methodological issues related to the power of the researcher, which are relevant to a wide range of academic fields, and I felt disappointed that Tate skims over them.

In presenting the empirical data, Tate focuses on the interaction between the subjects, arguing that no individual is independent of culture and that if we are to draw on these Black women's identities 'as texts of social practice' then we must engage in 'blurring the analytic line between theory and practice'. A challenge facing any study that draws on a range of disciplines is to make the work accessible to a range of readers. As a reader unschooled in the field of linguistics, I sometimes felt that the processes of analysis Tate adopted were shrouded in mystery and should have been explained more clearly.

We learn very little of the professional backgrounds of the women or of their individual life-stories, although Tate does mention that many were or had been actively involved in Black politics at the time of the research. Nor is it entirely clear when the stories were collected or in what particular political struggles these women have engaged. I would argue that to fully understand women's talk about everyday experiences we need to know something about the specific period in which these conversations took place and in which Tate appears to have done her theorizing. I would suggest that her concerns about 'race' and culture being treated as anachronistic by commentators probably had more resonance in the mid-1990s, when I suspect this study took place, than they do today.

A decade later, the national and geopolitical contexts and, indeed, the politics of 'race' feel radically different. I would have found some discussion of the meaning of her findings for Britain today extremely helpful. What are the implications of her theories for our understanding of Black women's identifications in Britain in 2005? How are we to understand, for example, the ways in which British Muslim women experience hybridity and otherness, within a society that remains racialized yet within which racist discourses focus increasingly on cultural difference? What are the implications of her thinking for this very diverse group, and for those who choose to criticize those of their fellow citizens who identify with a faith community? How should those concerned about racial justice respond to those within the academy who declare there is no place for religious belief and religious identification? For me, there are a number of questions about the social responsibility of researchers examining questions of 'race' and gender that the study raises but which remain unanswered.

Unfortunately, Tate spends much of the discussion introducing and critiquing other theorists, and at times I was left with the impression that I was reading the work of a PhD candidate anxious to prove she had read widely, yet who does not make the most of her own data in illustrating her theoretical insights.

Debates about identity formation within racialized contexts remain critical today and I share Tate's view that we need to think of hybridity 'as an everyday possibility' and to engage 'in a process in which we see ourselves in the other and acknowledge this as part of identifications'. Quite a lot of the analysis revolves around the identities of those Black women who, as a consequence of their light skins, are sometimes perceived, both within Black communities, and by a number of white people, not to be authentically Black. The discussion will have a number of resonances for those Black women whose physical appearance causes others to question their authenticity. A focus on skin colour, authenticity and the identifications of those of mixed and dual heritage may, however, lead some readers to associate the concept of hybridity primarily with these individuals. This, in itself, is likely to undermine the emphasis on the hybridity of the everyday that Tate stresses, and which is probably the central and most important idea arising from Tate's work.

I did not find this an easy book and I suspect that I would not have persisted with it had I not agreed to write this review. I am still puzzling over its meaning for those, like myself, who are interested in social policy. I was attracted, as I suspect many will be, by the title, *Black Skins, Black Masks*, which cleverly adapts the title of Franz Fanon's classic text *Black Skin, White Masks*. Perhaps I should have hesitated when I read the subtitle: 'hybridity, dialogism, performativity'. As academics, we can choose to address a range of audiences. In *Black Skins, Black Masks*, Tate chooses to write for a select, rather than broad academic audience, which is a pity. This audience can be reached, in the style she adopts, through a series of scholarly articles. Shirley Anne Tate presents us with important insights into the identifications of a sample of Black British women, who behind their Black Masks and their assertions of Blackness, reveal a range of Black hybrid identities, which exist regardless of skin tone. If she were to have made a few concessions to those less familiar with the academic discourse she adopts, and given some consideration to the political context in which the book is published, she might have produced a tremendously exciting and more widely influential book.

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